

ON THE SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE OF OUR NUCLEAR CRISIS

by Daniel Ellsberg

Certain little-known realities in today's world of American nuclear policy pose important religious questions for us. Let me explore these realities with you by outlining several misconceptions, widespread among Americans, about the function and intended targets of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security planning. This subject was my professional concern when I worked in the Pentagon.

Most Americans believe that nuclear weapons are included in our military plans only to deter nuclear attack upon the United States or its NATO allies. Their sole purpose--as the scientists at the weapons design laboratories will tell us--is to assure that nuclear weapons will never be used by anyone to initiate nuclear war.

That is Myth #1: The United States will never strike first with nuclear weapons, or even plan or threaten such "first use."

Myth #2 is that U.S. planners would never plan to use weapons of this sort against people--against cities--except to retaliate for an attack upon our own cities.

Myth #3 is that the pictures and writings we have seen of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki adequately convey the destruction which would be inflicted in a modern nuclear war.

The United States, which has pioneered and maintained a lead in virtually every aspect of nuclear technology, developed atomic weapons and plans for their use in the late 40's when we had a nuclear monopoly--i.e., when only the U.S. could initiate nuclear war. And for most of the nuclear era, contrary to what the public

was led to fear, we maintained a massive superiority over the Soviets which continued to make it unimaginable that anyone but the United States would "go first." Our government has never agreed to a "no first use" constraint on its plans. Successive American presidents have repeatedly rejected offers from the Soviets for a bilateral no-first-use agreement. The Reagan administration has refused to join the Soviets in their unilateral commitment, announced at the 1982 United Nations Special Session on Disarmament, never to be the first to use nuclear weapons. Quite the contrary: Each U.S. president, from Truman on, has officially affirmed our intention to initiate nuclear attacks, if necessary, in conflicts not only in Western Europe but in the Middle East or elsewhere. Actual threats of possible imminent U.S. first use have been made repeatedly--usually in secret from the American public--in conflicts involving Korea, Indochina, China, and Berlin. (For references, see my "Call to Mutiny" in Protest and Survive, Monthly Review Press, 1981.)

In the event of nuclear operations initiated by the United States against the Soviet Union (presumably arising out of a non-nuclear conflict or a fear of Soviet attack), our plans have always included bombing every Soviet city, in addition to military targets. Every one of the 218 Russian cities with over 100,000 people is targeted for attack, and 80% of the next 800 cities. All of these cities will be destroyed with only a small fraction of our nuclear arsenal, whether we strike first or second.

Cities on both sides would be hit, not by the kind of atomic weapons that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but by thermonuclear

weapons, H-bombs, which require a Nagasaki-type A-bomb as a trigger. Some H-bomb warheads have an explosive power of 20 million tons of TNT, two million times the power of the largest block-busters of World War II, one thousand times the yield of the Nagasaki bomb. Thus, pictures of the destruction of Nagasaki reveal no more than the effects of dropping on a single populated city the detonator of one modern hydrogen weapon, of which several tens of thousands now exist on both sides. Nowadays every missile and every bomber, with its multiple warheads, has the lethal capacity--and thus the moral implications--of an Auschwitz.

No national leader, of course, has ever wanted to initiate a nuclear war. But each of our presidents has wanted the ability to threaten, credibly, to do so, and nearly every one has found occasion secretly to use our weapons in an actual crisis: use them in the precise way that a gun is used when it is pointed at someone's head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled. It is precisely in hopes of repeating such threats, and of restoring their credibility--now greatly diminished by Soviet nuclear parity--by regaining our former first-strike superiority, that the current administration (like its predecessor) proposes to budget several hundred billion dollars to develop, test, produce and deploy many thousands of new nuclear weapons. Yet in a world where opponents are comparably armed, and therefore less likely than before to back down, such threats are no substitute for nuclear war. They are a path to nuclear war.

In this light, long before the final, mutually disastrous breakdown, the very preparations by our society that lead toward this apocalypse involve us all right now in a moral catastrophe. Every new test of a nuclear weapon, on either side, is a rehearsal for a holocaust. The taxes we spend on such weapons, the talents and labor and resources we mobilize in order better to threaten or carry out the initiation of nuclear warfare, all express a readiness and intent to massacre: not merely to kill opposing leaders who fail to heed such threats, or their armed followers, but to annihilate their wives and children and elders and sick. We are preparing as well to exterminate their livestock, their birds and fish; to burn all their habitations and buildings; to poison their wells and fields and lakes; to freight their winds with radioactivity carrying death to neighboring lands; to set their forests blazing, with their wild animals; to leave no living things unharmed, save wild grasses and insects, resistant to the radiation from our weapons.

Some questions such plans evoke are, I have said, religious ones. What is the nature and role of humanity, which is now contemplating and readying this project of extermination? How did we get to this? What is our relation and obligation to the rest of life? Is it our destiny to reverse the process of creation?

Indeed, what is the true religion of the men (not women) who made these first-strike plans and who believe they have the right to implement them under certain circumstances (of "enemy intransigence")? And do the rest of us share that same religion?

If not, what are we called on to do?

In any Western religious terms, such plans are evil, a sin: which means, or should mean, "what one must not collaborate with or be part of, must not allow, must expose and resist." So Gandhi would question (as might others from Eastern spiritual traditions) whether enlightenment is truly to be sought in ignoring or denying such social realities, while the very silence of one's meditation is being counted as assent.

Every spiritual path is partly defined by some form of ethical consideration, and in particular, restraints on the circumstances and scale of permissible violence. Although, for example, Christianity has not been a pacifist religion except for a small minority since the time of Constantine, for that same period of 1600 years Christian "just war" theory has prescribed limits on legitimate violence even in otherwise justified defensive wars. The heart of this doctrine--eventually central to international laws of war--has been the absolute immunity of non-combatants from deliberate military attack, with non-combatants defined broadly as people not directly threatening harm to other humans with weapons.

Our war plans, which threaten by their very existence the deliberate annihilation of non-combatants on a scale with no precedent in human barbarism, not only violate just war principles and international law; they do not fit within the broadest interpretation of any traditional system of ethics, whether Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, Islamic, animist.... There are, indeed, elements within every religious tradition (which

in these circumstances demand rethinking!) that foster compliance with state authority; but never to the point of envisioning a collaboration and conscious preparation to launch a form of combat that would murder half a billion to a billion humans, and could end life on earth.

One could understand a religion with such an ethics only as a form of Satanism, a worship of unbridled power that gives national leaders the right to gamble with forces that can undo creation. In historic terms, our current nuclear plans and threats derive directly from the secret adoption by Allied leaders (midway in World War II) of Hitler's ethics of power and total war, as expressed in the bombing of Rotterdam and London, and then, a hundredfold, in the firestorms kindled in Hamburg, Cologne, Dresden and Tokyo. Then, as now, the public had to be lied to about the true aiming points and intended effects of the area bombing. To this day, the sustained conversion of highest civilian leaders to a new official ethics, permitting deliberate threat and massacre of non-combatants as an instrument of policy, has had to be kept secret from most American citizens.

Few Americans are pacifists, but even in the cauldron of World War II and the ice-floes of the Cold War, their acceptance and worship of the power of unlimited violence have not kept pace with their leaders'. Our hope of salvation, in whatever sense, rests on that.

These plans, these policies, and the leaders who direct them can and must be opposed without relying on violence. Violence

would only confirm and reinforce the very values and practices we must oppose. But even in America, with a tradition much stronger than elsewhere of heresy to the ubiquitous religion of state power, that opposition cannot place without personal risk--thus, not without personal courage. For that we must draw on our deepest commitments, our sense of who we are and what purposes and values we serve, our deepest and broadest loyalties, and the support of our spiritual beliefs and community.

Yogi Bhajan remarked to me: "What we are up to is a revolt against our own destruction." I hear that as a call to mutiny. I believe we must seek to find and share with each other the political and religious truths and practices that will give us the strength to recall to our fellow Americans that to be loyal to this country does not, not, not compel us to be disloyal to the human species and to future life on earth.